
A COMMENTARY

Prophets, Heretics, and Peculiar Evils

REINA PENNINGTON

ON SZAFRANSKI:

IN HIS article, in this issue of *APJ*, Col Richard Szafranski considers the implementation of a Quadrennial Strategy Review as proposed by the secretary of defense and supported by the Department of Defense (DOD). He suggests that the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps will be pitted against the Air Force and that the central issue would be whether surface or air and space forces are more cost-effective. Szafranski speculates on whether jointness or interservice rivalry would prevail in such a scenario and seems to believe that the joint culture created in the past decade is a frail thing indeed. He suggests that the debate on roles and missions continues to be "the capstone activity of interservice rivalry" and is still the driving force in the Pentagon. Factors such as continued budget cuts, the lack of an identifiable threat, and uncertainty about the future will exacerbate rivalries, throwing the services into a Darwinistic struggle unmitigated by Joint Staff efforts to foster cooperation rather than competition. As the "gloves [come] off" and the services "scoot down Maslow's pyramid," any review process will resemble a demolition derby in which survival is based on the destruction of other services' programs.

The possibility of a recurring strategy review provides Szafranski an interesting framework within which to examine the state of airpower theory and doctrine. When the nature of future conflict is uncertain, he believes, then the serv-

ices will attempt to justify their strategic utility by asserting superior theories and by drawing on tradition and historical successes. Szafranski says the Air Force will have "a tougher row to hoe" in these debates than the Army or Navy.

A strategy review would be conducted in the context of the uncertain view of the future threat. Here, Szafranski paints a grim picture indeed. Like Samuel P. Huntington and Martin van

But Colonel Szafranski believes the Air Force will find itself unable to prove its utility. He argues that the failure of airpower in Vietnam and Afghanistan has, for many people, invalidated the concept of air superiority.

Creveld, he postulates a world where civilizations descend a long spiral into ever-more atavistic nationalism and terrorism conducted by "de-massified" forces. This sort of threat, he implies, can be countered only by the Army and Navy. The Army will argue that its "simple, all-weather, all-terrain soldiers" are the most flexible tool in any future war; that territory matters; and that only

the Army can control territory. The Navy, he suggests, will argue for John Keegan's theory of future war along the littoral, making the Navy the best response. The Air Force, however, will find itself hard-pressed to justify its utility in such an unpredictable environment.

The Air Force, he believes, cannot survive unless it can both refute what he describes as the "very nearly indisputable arguments" of the other services and then advance an alternative and "superior theory" of airpower. But Colonel Szafranski believes the Air Force will find itself unable to prove its utility. He argues that the failure of airpower in Vietnam and Afghanistan has, for many people, invalidated the concept of air superiority—though he does not suggest that the failure of the armies in both cases invalidated the utility of surface maneuver forces. In addition, he says, the Air Force must prove that its human-operated platforms are the only means of accomplishing air superiority.

***The Air Force will find itself in a
Catch-22: it can only justify its utility
based on theory . . . but the theory
we have is shaky
and overextended.***

Colonel Szafranski seems to say that the Air Force's problem is both too little and too much theory. He dismisses Col John Warden's theories (generally credited as key to the success of air operations in Operation Desert Storm) as being little understood in the Air Force. The Air Force has no "success metrics" to prove its power. We have no airpower theory that can stand. The theory of air superiority, he believes, is a house of cards: we theorize that air superiority will be meaningful in a future conflict (Szafranski argues that it may not); we theorize that atmospheric solutions are required when surface solutions might suffice; and we theorize that these atmospheric

solutions require a human in the cockpit—a requirement that Szafranski implies may soon be impracticable. At some point, he says, the weight of theory would seem to collapse the Air Force's model. Thus, the Air Force will find itself in a Catch-22: it can only justify its utility based on theory (Szafranski finds Air Force history and tradition an inadequate base compared to the history and tradition of surface forces), but the theory we have is shaky and overextended. It is a no-win situation. Szafranski seems to agree with Goethe that life—in this case, the life of the Air Force—is set into a theory just as a live body is set on the cross on which it is crucified.

There are several problems with Szafranski's analysis, which is admittedly provocative. First is the conflation of airpower theory; Colonel Szafranski's discussion merges all the potential roles and missions of the Air Force into a single "theory of air superiority." Second, he says that the Air Force will find it hard to justify the use of manned aircraft in the future, implying that technology will replace the human elements; yet, he says it is precisely the continued reliance on the human component that will give the Army its flexibility. Third, it is highly debatable that the Army will in fact disavow the utility of the Air Force. The Army has explicitly stated in its own manuals that it "cannot win the land battle without the Air Force."¹ If the inutility of the Air Force must be proved, then the burden of proof will rest at least as much on the Army as on the Air Force.

Richard Szafranski deals in realms of theory that are fascinating, exasperating, compelling, and dismaying. With every new twist of technology, theorists have postulated the reduction or elimination of the Air Force—and of the human in the cockpit. Today, futurists prophesy a return to barbarism: future war will combine high technology with primitivism—and still they predict the demise of airpower. Dr James Mowbray has noted the fact that "the Air Force is still plagued by a high degree of paranoia about its survival as a service in spite of its track record of

success.”² One can only hope that Szafranski is a victim of this paranoia rather than a prophet.

Colonel Szafranski posits an extreme scenario in which choices must be made between surface and air forces, in which the Air Force must prove it is the be-all and end-all of military power—or else be diminished or even absorbed. Like most dichotomies, this one is false. There are multiple scenarios of future war, and it is easy to see that in some situations airpower might indeed be decisive. In others, naval or ground forces might be pivotal. A true joint-service perspective, especially in the area of roles and missions, should help to eliminate such false dichotomies. Szafranski himself acknowledges that his grim scenario could be avoided if the service chiefs could speak with one voice but notes that such a solution—a truly joint solution—will happen only in “a world where pigs fly.”

ON MYERS:

THESE COMMENTS were first prepared in response to Colonel Szafranski’s presentation at a recent conference panel on the topic of “Interservice Rivalry and the Rise of Jointness.” At that time, I stated that I admired his moral courage in challenging the Air Force’s party line. Unfortunately, it does still require courage to state a position that is bound to be unpopular and controversial. In the aftermath of the conference, charges of “bashing” were leveled at Colonel Szafranski and other speakers who found the current state of airpower theory lacking.³

The Air Force’s continuing inability to tolerate self-criticism is even more dismaying than Szafranski’s article. Dr Mowbray noted that the Air Force’s paranoia is practically a “sacred legacy of the service.”⁴ It would appear that Szafranski and his critics share this paranoia; Szafranski exacerbates it, while his critics cannot tolerate its discussion. This intolerance is all the more disturbing because a flurry of discussion

Richard Szafranski deals in realms of theory that are fascinating, exasperating, compelling, and dismaying.

Although most Air Force officers will reject Szafranski’s approach, it is useful for the discussion it generates—and perhaps this is precisely the effect he hopes to achieve. Szafranski wants to infuriate the Air Force so it will finally decide what it wants to be when it grows up. Undoubtedly, Colonel Szafranski’s work will be a centerpiece of the roles and missions debate for years to come.

on this very issue occurred more than a decade ago. In 1984, William S. Lind charged the Air Force with “unilateral disarmament in the war of ideas.”⁵ In 1988, Murphy Donovan wrote an eloquent plea for free discussion in an article on “Strategic Literacy” that appeared in this journal. Donovan noted that one result of the heated debate over Lind’s views was that “someone shot the messenger. *AU [Air University] Review* was consigned to the boneyard.”⁶ The editor of *Airpower Journal* (the successor to *Air University Review*)

In 1984, William S. Lind charged the Air Force with “unilateral disarmament in the war of ideas.”

view) is now trying to revitalize free discussion (see his editorial “There Are No Sacred Cows” in

the Spring 1995 issue).⁷ But it would appear that conditions are only slightly more receptive in the 1990s than they were in the 1980s.

We're all familiar with Voltaire's famous aphorism "I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write."⁸ That is what I would say to Dick Szafranski. We need thinkers like him, however much we disagree with their views. Murphy Donovan charged that "of all the services, it is no accident and more than a little ironic that the Air

We're all familiar with Voltaire's famous aphorism "I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write." That is what I would say to Dick Szafranski.

Force—a corps inspired by the vision of Billy Mitchell and Hap Arnold—is now a slack player in the world of strategic ideas."⁹ We might finally reach pro status if we learn to conduct an intelligent and reasoned debate with theorists like Szafranski rather than irresponsibly dismissing their ideas.

Ironically, Szafranski is hardly the first to suggest that a comprehensive theory of airpower is lacking. Dr Harold R. Winton, who constructed the course in military theory at the School of Advanced Airpower Studies, Maxwell AFB, Ala-

bama, recently concluded that "there simply does not exist any body of codified, systematic thought that can purport to be called a comprehensive theory of air power" and then elegantly articulated the preconditions for developing such a theory.¹⁰ Winton described the current state of Air Force thinking in this area as a "black hole" but seems to have avoided charges of "bashing."

Is Richard Szafranski a prophet or a heretic? Neither, I hope; he is simply an able thinker who challenges our assumptions. He should be neither canonized nor pilloried. Instead of castigating Szafranski, we should look to our own arguments. If airpower theory is soundly developed, then Szafranski's scenarios will never occur. If jointness prevails over interservice rivalry, the United States will get the military forces it needs and can afford. We can only hope for a world in which pigs fly but "pork" dies.

John Stuart Mill said it best in *On Liberty*:

The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race: posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.¹¹

This journal provides an excellent arena for such collisions and exchanges—but only if the players agree upon the rules. Are we ready for a fair fight? □

Notes

1. Army Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*, 1976, 1.
2. Dr James A. Mowbray, "Air Force Doctrine Problems: 1926-Present," *Airpower Journal* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 36.
3. See Gene Myers, "Interservice Rivalry and Air Force Doctrine: Promise, Not Apology," this issue.
4. Mowbray, 41 (note 127).

5. William S. Lind, "Reading, Writing, and Policy Review: The Air Force's Unilateral Disarmament in the War of Ideas," *Air University Review* 36, no. 1 (November-December 1984): 66-70.
6. Lt Col G. Murphy Donovan, "Strategic Literacy," *Airpower Journal* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 71.
7. Lt Col James W. Spencer, "There Are No Sacred Cows," *Airpower Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 2.
8. This quotation is often attributed to the *Essay on Tolerance*; ac-

tually, it occurs in a letter to Abbott Le Richie. Thanks to Dr Daniel Moran of the Naval Postgraduate School for tracking this down for me.

9. Donovan, 74.

10. Harold R. Winton, "A Black Hole in the Wild Blue Yonder: The Need for a Comprehensive Theory of Air Power," *Air Power History* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 32.

11. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1955), 23.

Contributor

Reina Pennington (BA, University of Louisville; MA, University of South Carolina) is completing a PhD in history with a focus on aviation history at the University of South Carolina. She served for nine years as an Air Force intelligence officer with the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing, the Aggressors, Defense Intelligence Agency, and Alaskan Air Command. She has written a number of articles for *Air Force Magazine*, *Air and Space Smithsonian*, and the *Journal of Soviet Military Studies*. Ms Pennington is currently writing a book entitled *Military Women Worldwide* for Greenwood Press.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in the Journal are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US Government. Articles may be reproduced in whole or in part without permission. If they are reproduced, the Airpower Journal requests a courtesy line.